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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ISTANBUL 001475

SIPDIS

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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/18/2016

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: COMPETITION FOR EXCELLENCE IN ISTANBUL MUNICIPAL DISTRICTS

REF: A. ISTANBUL 419

[¶](#)B. 05 ANKARA 7215

[¶](#)C. 04 ISTANBUL 1837

Classified By: ACTING PRINCIPAL OFFICER SANDRA OUDKIRK FOR REASONS 1.4
(B AND D.)

[¶](#)1. (C) Summary. Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) continues to challenge politics as usual through a successful mixture of energetic, grass roots-based politicking and a problem-solving approach to local issues. AKP came to power riding a crest of anger and dissatisfaction at traditional party corruption and sloth/indolence. They have held steady in the polls and in 2004 won a convincing plurality of municipalities across Turkey. At least one inside observer says their success is not because of adherence to an Islamist agenda but because AKP leaders rise above their own differences and adhere to the principle of improving life for their constituents. End Summary.

AKP) WE,RE HERE TO BETTER LIVES

[¶](#)2. (SBU) Looking at the accomplishments -- not to mention web sites -- of Istanbul's district municipality offices one may conclude that mayors and other political leaders court disaster if they rest on past accomplishments. While AKP may have stunned the establishment with a convincing national win in 2002 over the decomposing corpse of corruption-plagued traditional parties, AKP's emphasis on services and improvements for daily life aims to decisively answer the perennial constituent question, "What have you done for me lately?" Just ask Kagithane AKP Mayor Fazli Kilic.

[¶](#)3. (SBU) Kagithane includes territory where the Golden Horn diminishes to a trickle. Once a recreation area for the Ottomans, it degenerated into an industrial zone, rife with unlicensed construction including gecekondus (illegal housing ranging from shanties to apartment blocks). The Kagithane Municipality is tearing down buildings that stood for decades and replacing them with parks and transportation improvements, including highways. New flats are built to replace lost housing. Social welfare in the district is a high priority for community-minded and socially-conscious AKP members, one of the common elements within AKP (REF B). Kilic told us Kagithane soup kitchens feed 500 persons each day. One thousand school uniforms are delivered to needy children each year. The municipality encourages charity thrift centers and solicits donations for scholarships to enable some Kagithane students to attend school outside of Istanbul. Social welfare projects extend to the organization of a mass party planned for the late summer for boys circumcised at the traditional ages of 6-10. Projects of this kind are outside the responsibilities of an elected

mayor, according to Kilic, who said funding comes from charitable sources.

¶4. (SBU) Kagithane also actively solicits major tax-supported projects. One engineering project, perhaps rivaling ancient Byzantine water delivery in the city, will keep the Kagithane River flowing by delivering sea water from the Bosphorus several miles, and hills, away. Road tunnel construction will ease traffic between Kagithane and the Dolmabahce Palace area. And restoration of a 90-year old railway line to the Black Sea with the addition of a zoo should attract tourists. Mayor Kilic's secret weapon for initiating and completing these projects? Excellent relations with Istanbul's AKP Mayor Topbas and AKP Istanbul Chairman Muezzinoglu. The tunnels, water and train line are all funded by the Greater Istanbul Municipality. (Note: The Greater Istanbul Municipality was the creation of then Prime Minister Turgut Ozal in the mid-1980s when Bedrettin Dalan was ANAP mayor of Istanbul. It formalized district boundaries of old neighborhoods and established district mayors elected by popular vote. End note.) Comment: Kilic's focus on social welfare / constituent services and tax-payer funded public works projects are hallmarks of AKP's grass roots orientation. End comment.

. . . AND IN ONCE COSMOPOLITAN BEYOGLU

¶5. (SBU) While Kagithane represents a traditional Istanbul district, Beyoglu, though more famous with tourists, is in many ways a much greater challenge for its AKP mayor. Mayor Ahmet Misbah Demircan works hard to serve his constituents with innovative and ambitious projects -- but with possibly

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less financial backing from the AKP-dominated Greater Istanbul Municipality than his colleague in Kagithane. By contrast, Demircan also projects a pragmatic, possibly secular, outlook. Forty or more years ago, Beyoglu was home to a by-and-large wealthy and cosmopolitan community. The dramatic growth and development of the last 10 years in greater Istanbul largely bypassed Beyoglu. The wealthy moved to newer and more modern residences and poor families from Anatolia replaced them. While Beyoglu still hints at a cosmopolitan lineage, the battle to maintain its sophisticated heritage has not been entirely successful.

¶6. (SBU) Fighting to retain and even attract wealthier residents, Demircan is undertaking a number of important projects. Three priorities are: lighting to provide attractive and safe streets at night; renovation of historic (and not so historic) buildings and residences (5000 so far); and, wholesale urban renewal of certain neighborhoods. Three of 10 Beyoglu neighborhoods slated for renewal are complete. In order to monitor the progress, plan for additional renewal and track residential complaints, Demircan has installed a custom-designed computer program cataloging each resident's name and address, and family size as well as municipal documents related to the family, including property titles and billing records. The program includes photograph(s) of buildings and local street shots, providing specific locations a sense of the immediate neighborhood at the desktop.

¶7. (SBU) The engaging Demircan grew up in Beyoglu, where he learned to appreciate the tapestry of Beyoglu's cultural, ethnic and religious traditions. Demircan notes with pride that synagogues (including Neve Shalom, site of terrorist attacks in 1986 and 2003), churches and mosques and their worshippers exist in close proximity to one another within the district. He also reflected on the challenges presented when citizens have diverse visions of life. Demircan works to expose neighborhood youth to the cultural richness he associates with this Istanbul district. Five thousand of the district's 39,000 students attend a municipality-sponsored

summer camp where the arts, music, theater and sports are stressed. In a parallel comment to Kilic's observation, Demircan said most of these activities are beyond the scope and responsibility of a normal municipality.

¶8. (C) The two AKP mayors presented contrasts to one another. In Beyoglu, Demircan demonstrated an apparent ease and comfort with his American visitors. We asked about his place and role within the AKP. He joined the party because the traditional parties had become "ossified." (We have heard about opportunity within AKP from other, sometimes former, AKP activists.) Asked if different AKP wings (REF B) feel comfortable with each other, Demircan demurred but then said the factions had no choice but to "work together and avoid side questions and debates that would otherwise divide us." It was obvious, he said, that if AKP departed even slightly from this focus, they would lose support at the polls in present day Turkey. Comment. The Demircan and Kilic meetings help illustrate some differences within AKP. Debonair Demircan presents a stark contrast to the reserved Kilic. An aide best described as a bodyguard, never introduced, stood within our line of sight during the Kilic interview. It became abundantly clear that Kilic had no intention to brook questions about party outlook and philosophy. End comment.

BUYUKCEKMECE -- ANAP STRONGHOLD -- AND HOW IT STACKS UP

¶9. (SBU) The Buyukcekmece municipality in Istanbul offers a comparative glimpse at one of only six non-AKP (out of 32) districts in Greater Istanbul. Buyukcekmece's ANAP Mayor Dr. Hasan Akgun, first elected in 1994, showed us the master plan for the city prepared by a U.S. firm. The plan protects the district's sandy beaches and water access by prohibiting development within one hundred meters of the shoreline. Local papers say the beaches drew one million Stambulus on a recent steamy weekend. The plan reserves the next 200 meters from the shore for recreational facilities including athletic fields and clubs. Rare for Istanbul, electric lines and other utilities are buried. Mixed housing options also abound in the plan. The municipality takes advantage of a recent law permitting localities to support local schools by using local tax base to build additional school buildings; the schools in Buyukcekmece meet European standards for classroom size (21 students per classroom) and feature a full day of classes (most schools in Turkey are forced to accommodate a minimum 30 or more students per classroom and

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use split shifts in order to make full use of existing classroom space.) The mayor claims a policy of solid support for NGOs who run a variety of social services, but the city does not financially contribute to these programs.

¶10. (SBU) On the remote edge of town is an industrial park, lost to a neighboring AKP-led municipality after elections in March 2004 (REF C). Buyukcekmece has challenged the redrawn boundary line in court and Akgun anticipates a favorable ruling sometime this fall. If so, it would restore significant tax base. Since 1994, Akgun has continued to win his elections and says AKP has tried to co-opt him, noting that other opposition party district mayors have changed party affiliation to avoid the politically-driven economic pressures. A man of ambition, Akgun aspires to becoming mayor of Greater Istanbul one day.

¶11. (SBU) Philosophically, Akgun championed the secular state in the tradition of Ataturk and Ozal. Of the municipal officials we visited since outbreak of the hostilities in Lebanon/Israel, Akgun was the only one to ask direct questions about U.S. foreign policy. He said that in anticipation of next year's presidential election, we would begin to see more political maneuvering by ANAP and other opposition parties. Signaling dissatisfaction with ANAP

party leader Erkan Mumcu, he predicted we'd be seeing a lot more of former Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz in the days ahead.

TURKEY,S POLITICAL MILIEU

¶12. (C) Comment. AKP members and activists place a premium on a civil society defined within the Islamic family of faith, perhaps regardless of their group identification within the party itself. Civic works to help those less fortunate, high on the AK Party agenda and its Islamist forerunners in Turkey, appear to be a natural byproduct of traditional Muslim culture and practice and are easily incorporated into AKP structure. AKP leadership freely refer to these good deed values and mechanisms in terms of electoral advantage (REF A). In an article published in Al-Ahram Weekly, Erdogan advisor Dr. Ahmet Davutoglu wrote in 2004 that any mechanism that furthers the core values of Islam is legitimate. Core values include protection of life, protection of intellect, protection of the next generation, protection of religion, protection of property and the realization of justice. While the values are unchanging, the mechanisms, such as political systems, are transient. It is clear that these philosophical underpinnings have translated into a viable political strategy that wins votes while forcing politicians from other parties to focus more closely on social welfare projects than might otherwise be their inclination. End comment.

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